PATTERNS OF POWER

The Cost Column

Position-Logic as the Micro-Foundation of the Whole Inquiry — How the Floor of Force Sets the Price of Defection in Every Ledger at Once, and Why Its Emptying Is the Only Thing That Moves an Order

THOMAS J. BRYAN

Preface

Every study before this one has described power from the outside, as structure — a floor of force, a managed belief laid over it, a priesthood to tend it, a settlement of who owns what beneath, and the four chaoses that crack the floor to let an order change. But a structure does not act; people act, one at a time, each weighing what he wants against what it would cost him. This final study descends from the structure to the choosing, and makes one claim: that the same engine the project has described from the outside can be described from the inside as a single rule of decision, and that the two descriptions meet at one place — a single column in a ledger.

The rule is the one the project has called position-logic: people act on benefit against cost. Bare, it is a useless truism; its whole power lives in two caveats. Benefit is undefined until one knows what a particular person *values* — which is why More and Cromwell, in one room and one oath, chose opposite fates. And a cost is no cost unless the threat of it is *credible* — a punishment that will not be inflicted alters no one's reckoning. The second caveat is the hinge of the whole study, because the credibility of a cost is not a private fact about a person but a public fact about the world, and the most important public fact of all is the state of the floor of force.

From there the argument is a single identity and its consequences. The floor of force, translated into the language of decision, simply *is* the entry in every subject's cost column — the credible enforcer that prices defection too high to be worth it — so that an order holds not because all believe in it but because, for each, the sum comes out against revolt. The four mechanisms of elite chaos are then revealed as one event seen four ways: the emptying of that shared column. Decolonisation is offered as the cleanest proof — the colonies broke not when grievances changed but when the metropolitan enforcer turned inward and the cost of defection fell at once to nothing. And the rule is shown to be not merely true but usable, a way to forecast when and where an order will give, by reading the one variable that sits in every ledger regardless of what anyone values. It leans where it must on Schelling on credible threats, on Sen on the plurality of what men value, on Weber on the monopoly of violence, and on Granovetter on who moves first; each is explained where it is used.

A Note on This Collaboration

As throughout, the spine is Thomas J. Bryan's, and in this case the spine is the keystone. Position-logic — benefit against cost, corrected by the two caveats — is his way of reading how people decide, and the identification of the floor of force with the cost column, which welds the project's structural outside to its decision-making inside, is his as well. The model's work has been to set that rule beside the formal literatures it silently rediscovers — the theory of credible threats, the critique of the single-valued rational actor, the analysis of thresholds and cascades — and to show that the lived insight and the scholarship describe the same machine.

The study keeps the project's disciplines. Where it leans on a scholar it pauses to explain the mechanism plainly, for a reader meeting these ideas new. It holds its strongest claim — that the rule can actually forecast — against the honest objection, conceding that it predicts only the *when* and the *where* of change and never the particular soul who strikes first. And it preserves, at its centre, the freedom the project will not surrender: that the benefit column is filled by what each person values, which no structure supplies, so that the rule reads the weather of orders without ever pretending to move people like machines. The whole is held as tested, not revealed.

The Argument in Seven Parts

I — The Engine and the Ledger. The inquiry has described power from the outside, as structure; to complete it one must descend to the inside, to the decision rule by which people, weighing what they want against what it would cost them, turn structure into what actually happens. The bridge is a single column in a ledger.

II — The Two Caveats. Benefit against cost is empty until corrected twice: benefit is undefined until one knows what a person values (Sen on the plural values the rational actor ignores), and a cost is no cost unless the threat of it is credible (Schelling on deterrence). These are not hedges but the entire working machinery.

III — The Floor Is the Cost Column. The floor of force, translated into the language of decision, is the entry in every subject's cost column — the credible enforcer that prices defection too high. An order holds not because all believe in it but because, for each, the sum comes out against revolt. The belief keeps the benefit column of compliance high, so the cost column rarely needs checking.

IV — The Emptying of the Column. The four mechanisms of elite chaos — fracture, exhaustion, conquest, overproduction — are one event seen four ways: the emptying of the cost column. This is why elite chaos, and nothing else, moves an order: only it changes the variable that sits in every ledger at once.

V — The Accounting Event. Decolonisation is the cleanest proof. The colonies broke not when their grievances changed, which were old, but when the metropolitan enforcer turned inward or bled out — Spanish America in 1808, the European empires after the World Wars — and the cost of defection in every colonial ledger fell at once to nothing.

VI — Why It Predicts. The rule is not merely true but usable, threading between the model that predicts falsely (assuming all value the same thing) and the one that predicts nothing (pure contingency). It forecasts by reading the one variable that sits in every ledger regardless of values — the credibility of the enforcer — and tells the *when* and the *where*, if never the *who*. Granovetter on who moves first.

VII — The One Engine. The whole inquiry now stands revealed as a single machine described twice — from the outside as structure, from the inside as decision — meeting at the cost column. To read that column is the nearest thing the study of power affords to foresight, and the surest guide to where an order can be moved.

A Note on Sources

This study is chiefly a synthesis of the project's own prior work, joined to a small number of formal literatures it rediscovers from the inside.

The decision rule. That a threat deters only insofar as it is credible — that a punishment the adversary believes will not be inflicted alters no cost-benefit reckoning — is Thomas Schelling's, in "The Strategy of Conflict" (1960). That the rational actor with a single objective is a "rational fool," and that real people weigh plural and incommensurable values, is Amartya Sen's. The definition of the state as the monopolist of legitimate violence is Max Weber's. That people have differing thresholds for joining an action, the lowest moving first and lowering the threshold for the rest, is Mark Granovetter's, in his threshold models of collective behaviour (1978). Modern works are paraphrased and credited, not quoted at length.

The proof. The Spanish American wars of independence (1808–1826), precipitated by Napoleon's invasion of Spain and the abdication of the Bourbon king, and the great decolonisations following the two World Wars, are drawn from the standard historical record.

The lineage. Above all this study rests on the project's own corpus — the floor of force and the managed belief, the settlement of who owns what, the four chaoses by which orders change, and the two caveats first drawn from Thomas More and Thomas Cromwell — of which it is the micro-foundation and the keystone.

PART I

THE ENGINE AND THE LEDGER

That the whole inquiry has described power from the outside, as structure — floor, belief, settlement, the openings through which orders change — and that to complete it one must descend to the inside, to the decision rule by which individual people, weighing what they want against what it would cost them, turn all that structure into what actually happens

This project has built, study by study, a description of power from the outside. It has laid down a floor of force and spread a managed belief over it; it has found a priesthood tending the belief and a settlement of who owns what beneath it; it has traced how orders hold and the four ways the floor cracks to let them change. All of that is structure — the architecture of power seen, as it were, from above, in plan. But a structure is not a living thing; it does not act. What acts is people, one at a time, each making a choice — to obey or defect, to pay the tax or join the revolt, to swear the oath or refuse it — and the structure is only the sedimented result of millions of those choices going the same way. To complete the inquiry, then, one must descend from the plan to the choosing: from the structure seen from above to the decision rule operating inside each head below. This final study is that descent, and it offers a single claim — that the same engine the project has described from the outside can be described from the inside as one simple rule of decision, and that the bridge between the two descriptions, the hinge on which the whole thing turns, is a single column in a ledger.

Benefit, cost, and the thing in between

The decision rule is the one this project has called position-logic, and stated baldly it is the oldest idea in the study of human action: people do what they expect to benefit them and avoid what they expect to cost them, weighing the one against the other and acting on the balance. Stated so baldly it is also nearly useless, a truism that predicts everything and therefore nothing — which is why the whole of its power lives in two corrections that the next part takes up in detail, the two caveats without which "benefit against cost" is an empty scale. But the reason to begin here, with the ledger and its two columns, is that it supplies the missing link the structural studies left implicit. The floor of force, the managed belief, the settlement, the cracking of the order under elite chaos — every one of these, it will turn out, acts upon the world in exactly one way: by changing what sits in the columns of the ledgers that ordinary people are, at every moment, totting up. The structure does not move people directly. It moves the numbers in their ledgers, and the people move themselves. Find the column the structure writes in, and the whole machine resolves into a single mechanism.

PART II

THE TWO CAVEATS

That the bare rule of benefit against cost is empty until it is corrected twice — that benefit is undefined until one knows what a particular person values, and that a cost is no cost at all unless the threat of it is credible — and that these two corrections are not hedges but the entire working machinery of the rule

The bare rule is empty, and it is worth seeing exactly why, because the two repairs that fill it are the whole of its working machinery. The trouble is that both of its terms — benefit and cost — are blanks. They look like quantities, as if one could simply add them up; but neither has any value at all until it is filled in for a particular person in a particular situation, and the two caveats are the instructions for filling them in. They were first set out in this project in the study of the man who would not sign, where Thomas More and Thomas Cromwell, in one room and under one oath, reached opposite decisions from the identical situation. Here they become the general rule.

What a man values, and what will actually be collected

The first caveat governs the benefit column: *you cannot know what benefits a man until you know what he values*. The standard picture of the rational actor, the one that economics long ran on, quietly assumes that everyone values the same thing — money, or power, or survival — and so it can read any man's benefit column straight off his situation. But this is false, and where it matters most it is most false. The economist Amartya Sen long ago mocked this figure as a "rational fool," a creature with a single objective it maximises blindly, and pointed out that real people carry plural and incommensurable values — commitments, loyalties, faiths — that no universal scale can capture. More valued his soul above his life; Cromwell valued advancement above a doctrine; and so the very same oath was a catastrophe in one man's benefit column and a trifle in the other's. The caveat does not tell you what a man values. It tells you that you must find out, separately, for him — and in doing so it keeps the rule honest about the irreducible variety of people. The second caveat governs the cost column: *a cost is no cost unless the threat of it is credible.* A punishment that will not in fact be inflicted does not deter, because a rational person discounts it to nothing; it is, in the phrase used earlier in this project, not a cost but a rumour. This is not a casual observation but one of the firmest results in the formal study of conflict. The strategist Thomas Schelling built his classic analysis of deterrence on exactly this point: a threat, he showed, has power only to the degree that the party it is aimed at believes it will actually be carried out — that the threatener has both the capacity and the will to follow through — and a threat the adversary judges to be a bluff alters no one's behaviour at all, because it changes nothing in the cost column it was meant to fill. The cost that deters is the credible cost, and only the credible cost. These two caveats are not refinements at the margin. They are the rule. The first keeps it anchored to the real person and his real values; the second keeps it anchored to whether the world will, in fact, make good on its threats. And it is the second caveat that opens the door to everything structural, because the credibility of a cost is not a private fact about a person's values. It is a public fact about the world — and the most important public fact of all is the state of the floor of force.

PART III

THE FLOOR IS THE COST COLUMN

That the floor of force, translated out of the language of structure and into the language of decision, simply is the entry in every subject's cost column — the credible enforcer that prices defection too high to be worth it — so that an order holds not because all believe in it but because, for each, the sum comes out against revolt

Now the bridge can be built, and it is built in a single identity that, once seen, reorganises the whole project. *The floor of force, expressed in the language of the ledger, is the entry in everyone's cost column.* That is what a floor of force concretely *is*, from the inside: not an abstraction, not a brooding presence, but a specific and credible expectation, held in the mind of every potential defector, that organised violence will be brought to bear upon him if he moves against the order — and that the threat is no bluff, because the apparatus exists, is unified, and has the will and the capacity to follow through. The sociologist Max Weber defined the state as the human community that successfully claims the monopoly of legitimate violence over a territory; translated into the terms of this study, that monopoly is precisely a monopoly over the cost column — the state, and only the state, is the enforcer whose threat is credible enough to set the price of defection for everyone at once.

The settlement, held across a thousand ledgers

This is why an order does not require that its subjects believe in it, or love it, or even prefer it, in order to hold — a fact the structural studies asserted and this one explains. The order holds because, for each separate person capable of resisting it, the credible cost of resisting has been set higher than the benefit, so that the sum in his private ledger, whatever he values, comes out against revolt. The settlement of who owns what is kept not by consensus but by arithmetic: a single credible enforcer writing the same large number into the cost column of every ledger in the realm at once, so that the noble, the merchant, the general, and the peasant, each totting up his own books by his own values, each independently arrives at the conclusion that today is not the day to move. The floor of force is a cost column held steady across a thousand separate ledgers simultaneously. And here, too, the managed belief finds its exact place in the mechanism, completing the picture the genealogies began. If the floor of force is what fills the cost column, the belief is what keeps the *benefit* column of compliance high and the cost of *enforcement* low — for a subject who holds the order to be legitimate, ordained, natural, obeys freely, finding a positive benefit in compliance itself and needing no threat at all, which means the floor scarcely has to be used. Force and belief are the two columns of the same ledger, worked together: the belief makes most men obey for the benefit, so that the force need only price the defection of the few who do not. An order in which the belief has done its work is an order whose cost column rarely has to be checked, because the benefit column has already settled the matter. That is what it means for a hierarchy to run itself.

PART IV

THE EMPTYING OF THE COLUMN

That the four mechanisms of elite chaos, which looked like four separate routes to change, are revealed from the inside to be a single event seen four ways — the emptying of the cost column — and that this is why elite chaos, and nothing else, is what moves an order

With the floor identified as the cost column, the study of how orders change collapses into something far simpler than it appeared. The four mechanisms of elite chaos — fracture, exhaustion, conquest, overproduction — looked, in the previous study, like four distinct routes by which the floor of force cracks. Seen from inside the ledger, they are revealed to be one event, viewed from four angles: *the emptying of the cost column.* Each is a different way that the credible expectation of organised violence against a defector ceases to be credible, and so drops out of the cost column where it had been holding the whole order in place.

One event, four faces

Consider them again, now as accountants rather than historians. *Fracture* splits the enforcer: when the apex is at war with itself, the threat to punish a given man's defection may never be made good, because the faction that would punish him is busy fighting another faction — and a threat that may not be carried out is, by the second caveat, no longer a credible cost, so it shrinks in every ledger at once. The vassal recalculates the moment he sees the king too occupied with a rival to come and burn his lands. *Exhaustion* destroys the enforcer outright: the army that *was* the cost column bleeds away in a great-power war, and now there is simply no figure to write in the column at all, so that men who would never have dreamed of moving against an intact floor find the cost of moving has fallen, overnight, to nothing. *Conquest* swaps one enforcer for another, re-pricing every ledger in the territory at a stroke as a new power, whose threats point in new directions, takes over the writing of the cost column. And *overproduction* attacks the ledger from the other side: it manufactures a whole class of men — the thwarted, credentialed, ambitious surplus elite — whose *benefit* column is already loaded to bursting with grievance and blocked aspiration, so that for them even a still-credible cost is no longer high enough to outweigh the benefit of moving, and they become the ones willing to test whether the floor will really hold. This is why elite chaos, and elite chaos alone, changes orders, a claim the previous study made historically and this one now makes mechanically. Ordinary grievance, ordinary suffering, ordinary anger — these load individual benefit columns here and there, but they cannot move the order, because the cost column still holds and the sum still comes out against revolt for almost everyone. Only an event that empties the cost column changes the variable that sits in *every* ledger at once, and only a change in that shared variable can flip enough sums at the same time to move the structure. Elite chaos is the name for whatever empties the shared column. That is the whole of why it is the engine of change.

PART V

THE ACCOUNTING EVENT

That decolonisation, the supposed triumph of awakened peoples, is the cleanest proof of the mechanism — for the colonies broke not when their grievances changed, which were old, but when the metropolitan enforcer turned inward or bled out, and the cost of defection in every colonial ledger fell at once to nothing

If the mechanism is real, it should be visible most clearly where the cost column empties for an obvious external reason while the grievances stay exactly the same — a natural experiment in which only the cost side moves. Decolonisation is that experiment, and it is worth following in detail, because no episode is more thoroughly wrapped in the myth of the awakened people and none is better explained by the ledger.

Spanish America, and the empires after the wars

The grievances of the Spanish American creoles were old. For decades the Bourbon reforms had eroded their position and their loyalty, and for decades they had not moved, because the cost of moving was credible: Spain would send a fleet and an army, as everyone knew, and the sum came out against revolt. Then, in 1808, the cost column emptied — not because the creoles grew braver or more enlightened, but because Napoleon invaded Spain *itself*, forced the abdication of the Spanish king, and set his own brother on the throne, so that the metropolitan enforcer was suddenly fighting for its own existence at home and could spare nothing for the colonies. The legitimacy of crown rule across Spanish America collapsed with the king's abdication; juntas of local creole elites formed to rule in the vacuum; and every attempt by the restored Ferdinand to assemble the fleet and army that would re-price the colonial ledgers failed, until in 1820 the very troops gathered to be shipped against the colonies mutinied rather than go. Within roughly fifteen years almost the whole empire was gone — and the breaks were led, throughout, by colonial elites, not by risen masses, and were fought as often between rival groups of colonists as against Spain. The grievances had not changed. The cost column had emptied, and a thousand colonial ledgers re-totalled at once. The same accounting governs the great twentieth-century decolonisations, which followed the two World Wars as surely as the Spanish American break followed the Napoleonic. The European empires did not, in the main, release their colonies because they were morally persuaded that empire was wrong; they released them because the wars had left them exhausted, bankrupt, and militarily spent, so that two entries in the ledger moved at once: the cost to the imperial power of *holding* a restless colony rose above the benefit, while the cost to the colonial subject of *resisting* fell, because the floor that had once punished resistance had bled out in Europe. Decolonisation, in the brutal summary, is an accounting event — two ledgers re-priced by the same exhaustion, dressed afterwards, as such things always are, in the language of a people come into its own.

PART VI

WHY IT PREDICTS

That position-logic is not merely a true description but a usable forecasting tool, because it threads between the two ways such tools fail — predicting falsely by assuming everyone values the same thing, or predicting nothing by dissolving into pure contingency — and does so by watching the one variable that sits in every ledger regardless of what anyone values

It remains to say why this rule, beyond being a true account of how things have happened, is a tool one can actually forecast with — for that is the strongest claim made for it, and it needs defending. Most frameworks for predicting human behaviour fail in one of two opposite ways, and position-logic is built to thread the gap between them.

The two failures, and the shared column

The first failure is that of the clean models, the rational-actor schemes that predict crisply by assuming everyone values the same thing. They forecast precisely and are precisely wrong wherever values diverge, because they have no room for the man who chooses the block over the betrayal; they are blindsided by every More, and by every population that will not behave as its material incentives say it should. The opposite failure is that of the rich models, the culturalist and great-man accounts that capture the full human texture of values and contingency but, having made everything depend on the particular soul of the particular actor, can forecast nothing at all, because there is no structure left to forecast from. Position-logic threads between them by means of its two caveats, and the trick is precise. The values caveat concedes everything the rich models want: it refuses to assume it knows what anyone wants, leaves the benefit column genuinely open, and so keeps faith with the irreducible variety of people. But the enforcement caveat then recovers everything the clean models want, and it does so through a single observation — that of all the many things filling a man's cost column, *one* is not private, idiosyncratic, and unknowable. The credible threat of organised violence is a *public* fact, written into every ledger in the realm by the same hand, and it can be read from the outside without reading a single private soul: one can see whether the state's army is intact or shattered, whether the apex is unified or at war with itself, whether the imperial power is confident or invaded. And because that one shared entry sits in *every* ledger at once, a forecaster does not need to read a thousand private value-columns to predict the aggregate. He needs only to read the one column they all share. That is the whole of the predictive power, and it explains the curious shape of the forecasts it yields. Position-logic does not predict *which* man will defect, because that depends on the private benefit columns it deliberately leaves unread. It predicts *when* the order will be tested — when the cost column empties — and it predicts *where* the test will come from. For when the shared cost falls, the men who move first are not random: they are the ones whose benefit columns were already the most heavily loaded, the ones for whom the sum was closest to flipping even while the cost held. The sociologist Mark Granovetter modelled exactly this, showing that in any crowd people have differing thresholds for joining an action — some need to see only a few others move, some need to see many — and that it is the lowest-threshold actors who move first and, by moving, lower the threshold for the rest. In the ledger's terms, the lowest threshold is the most loaded benefit column: the overproduced and aggrieved elite, the vassal long straining at his bond, the colonial creole who has waited two generations for the enforcer to look away. One cannot say which of them strikes the first blow. One can say, with confidence, that when the cost column empties the first blow will come from *that* part of the distribution — and that is a forecast of real and usable shape, humble about the individual soul and ruthless about the structure that prices it.

PART VII

THE ONE ENGINE

That the whole inquiry now stands revealed as a single machine described twice — once from the outside as structure and once from the inside as decision — meeting at the cost column; and that to read that column is the nearest thing the study of power affords to foresight, and the surest guide to where an order can be moved

The descent is complete, and at its bottom the whole project stands revealed as one engine, described twice. From the outside, in the language of structure, it reads as this inquiry has always told it: a floor of force, a managed belief laid over it, a priesthood to tend the belief, a settlement of who owns what beneath, and the four chaoses that crack the floor to let the settlement change. From the inside, in the language of decision, it reads as a single rule running in every head at once: people act on benefit against cost, where benefit is fixed by what each privately values and cost is fixed by what the world will credibly collect. And the two descriptions are not two theories but one machine seen from two sides, meeting precisely at the cost column — for the floor of force *is* the cost column, the managed belief is what keeps the benefit column of compliance high so the cost column rarely needs checking, the settlement is the distribution those ledgers defend, and elite chaos is the emptying of the shared column that lets the ledgers, all at once, re-total. The structural studies built the outside of this engine; the lived view that runs beneath this whole project always saw the inside of it; and this study is the weld where the two halves meet.

What reading the column is for

There is a use in this, and it is the use that has been the quiet end of the entire inquiry. If an order holds because a credible cost sits in every ledger, and changes only when that cost empties, then the one thing worth watching — the nearest thing the cold study of power affords to foresight — is the state of the shared column. Not the people's anger, which is a near-constant and forecasts almost nothing; not the people's enlightenment, which is mostly the order's flattering story about itself; but the credibility of the enforcer: whether the floor is unified or fracturing, whole or exhausted, secure or about to be conquered. Read that, and one reads the weather of orders — when they will hold against any grievance, and when, against grievances no greater than yesterday's, they will suddenly give. And for anyone who would not merely predict the movement of an order but *use* it — who would widen the settlement, prise open the circle of who owns what, admit the excluded to the order that excludes them — the lesson is the same one the previous studies reached by other roads, now stated in its most exact form. The work is not to wait for a rising, which a full cost column will only crush. The work is to keep the benefit of a wider settlement loaded and legible and ready, so that on the day the cost column empties — and cost columns always, in time, empty — the men who move find that the cheapest re-total available to them, the new sum that comes out best by their own values, is the one that lets more people in. The floor of force is the cost column. To know that is to know where every order is strong, where it is weak, and where, when the moment comes, it can be moved. That is the whole of what the engine, finally understood, is good for.